

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

SS 1

WEEK 6

NON- AFRICAN DRAMA: *Inspector Calls* by J.B. Priestley.

PLOT SUMMARY

An Inspector Calls is a play written by J.B. Priestley and first performed in 1945 in the United Kingdom. Set in 1912, the play centres on the prosperous Birling family's dinner party which is being held to celebrate the engagement of their daughter, Sheila Birling, to Gerald Croft, the son of a competing industrialist.

Act one

Act 1 takes place in the Birling family's lavish dining room, where a celebratory dinner is taking place. The family, including Arthur Birling, his wife Sybil, their daughter Sheila, and their son Eric, are celebrating Sheila's engagement to Gerald Croft, the son of a fellow successful industrialist.

Arthur Birling, in a moment of patriarchal pride, delivers a toast for the young couple and then gives advice to Gerald and Eric, expressing his strong belief in individualism and capitalist values. He dismisses the rumours of war and predictions of social unrest, claiming they are nonsense.

Just as the mood becomes jovial, an unexpected visitor arrives. Edna, the maid, introduces Inspector Goole, who has come to investigate the suicide of a young woman named Eva Smith. The inspector shows a photograph of Eva to Mr. Birling, who admits that Eva used to work in his factory. He had sacked her eighteen months ago for inciting a strike for higher wages. Mr. Birling is defensive and maintains that he was justified in firing her.

Inspector Goole next reveals that after leaving Birling's factory, Eva worked in a shop where Sheila often went. He shows Sheila the same photo of Eva Smith, and she breaks down and runs out of the room, confessing she had been instrumental in getting Eva fired from the shop. Sheila had been envious and spiteful after Eva had looked better in a dress that Sheila wanted to buy.

Throughout the act, the Inspector continues his questioning in a calm and methodical manner, allowing the Birlings to incriminate themselves. The inspector's presence and questions start to reveal the flaws and cracks in the seemingly perfect Birling family.

The act concludes with Sheila warning her family that they are just beginning to realize the full implications of their actions, suggesting that the family's entanglement with the deceased Eva Smith is far from over. The stage is set for further revelations in the subsequent acts.

Act two

Act 2 sees the Birling family and Gerald Croft in their dining room, facing questioning from Inspector Goole about their connection to the suicide of a young woman, Eva Smith.

The Inspector turns his attention towards Gerald Croft, who initially denies knowing Eva Smith. But when pressured, Gerald admits to having had an affair with a woman named Daisy Renton, who the Inspector suggests is Eva Smith under a different name. Gerald had met her at a local bar and, learning she was in a desperate situation, had provided her with money and temporary accommodation in a friend's vacant apartment.

Sheila, upon hearing this, is deeply upset and returns Gerald's engagement ring, although she appreciates his honesty. Gerald then asks to leave the room to get some fresh air, which Inspector Goole allows.

The Inspector then turns his questioning to Mrs Birling. It is revealed that Eva, pregnant and destitute, had approached a women's charity headed by Mrs Birling for help. Eva used the name 'Mrs Birling,' which greatly offended Sybil. Without investigating Eva's circumstances, she used her influence to deny her the assistance she sought, driving her further into despair.

Throughout this act, Sheila grows increasingly distressed as she begins to grasp the full implications of her family's actions. She contrasts sharply with her parents, who persistently refuse to acknowledge their responsibility for Eva's death.

Act 2 ends with Mrs Birling trying to shift the blame onto the father of Eva's unborn child, insisting that he should be made to pay and be held responsible, not knowing that the person she condemns is her own son, Eric. This cliffhanger sets the stage for the final act.

Act 3

Act 3 opens with the aftermath of Mrs Birling's condemning statement about the father of Eva's unborn child, whom she's unaware is her own son, Eric. The family anxiously awaits Eric's return as Gerald comes back from his walk outside.

When Eric returns, he admits to meeting Eva/Daisy at the same bar Gerald had and having a relationship with her. When Eva became pregnant, he stole money from his father's office to support her. However, Eva refused to take any more money when she found out it was stolen. Eric is remorseful and upset over Eva's death and angrily responds to his parent's attempts to cover up their part in Eva's fate.

As the revelations wind down, Inspector Goole delivers a final monologue, reminding the Birlings of their responsibility towards other people. He warns them that if they don't learn from their actions, they will be taught in "fire and blood and anguish," foreshadowing the upcoming wars. After delivering this message, he leaves.

After the Inspector's exit, the family begins arguing. Gerald, who had left the room for some time, reveals that he met a police officer outside who claimed that no Inspector Goole works at the police department. The family begins to speculate that the Inspector might have been a fraud. They also find out that there might not have been a recent suicide case.

Just as they start feeling relieved and begin to believe they've escaped the consequences of their actions, the phone rings. Mr. Birling answers and is informed that a young woman has just died in the hospital after swallowing disinfectant, and a police inspector is on his way to question them. The play ends on this cliffhanger, leaving the audience to wonder what will happen next and reinforcing the themes of collective responsibility and the cyclical nature of consequences.

LIST OF CHARACTERS AND THEIR DESCRIPTIONS	
Character	Description

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Inspector Goole	A mysterious figure who interrogates the Birling family about their involvement in Eva Smith/Daisy Renton's life. He serves as the moral compass of the play, encouraging the characters to accept responsibility for their actions.
Arthur Birling	The patriarch of the Birling family. He is a prosperous factory owner, a local magistrate, and a former mayor. He is more concerned with his family's reputation and his potential knighthood than the welfare of his employees. He fired Eva from his factory for demanding higher wages.
Sybil Birling	The matriarch of the Birling family and a prominent member of local women's charities. She is cold and detached, refusing to accept responsibility for denying help to Eva, who was pregnant and destitute.
Sheila Birling	The Birlings' daughter, initially portrayed as naive and sheltered. After learning of her role in Eva's dismissal from a job at a local shop, she becomes remorseful and is the most receptive to the Inspector's message.
Eric Birling	The Birlings' son who is revealed to be an alcoholic and the father of Eva's unborn child. He stole money from his father's business to support Eva but was rejected when she discovered the money was stolen.
Gerald Croft	Engaged to Sheila Birling, he is the son of a wealthy industrialist. He had an affair with Eva (known to him as Daisy Renton) while he was in a relationship with Sheila. He provides Eva with temporary shelter and financial aid before eventually ending the affair.

LIST OF CHARACTERS AND THEIR DESCRIPTIONS

Eva Smith/Daisy Renton	Eva Smith is a pivotal yet unseen character in J.B. Priestley's "An Inspector Calls". She is a young working-class woman who tragically commits suicide by ingesting disinfectant, sparking the investigation that forms the basis of the play.
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THEMES

The main themes in *An Inspector Calls* are:

Social Responsibility: The play underscores the idea that every individual is responsible for their actions and their impact on others, particularly those less fortunate. The Inspector's probing questions force each character to confront their actions towards Eva Smith, emphasizing the interconnectedness of society.

Class and Social Inequality: The stark differences between the lives of the Birlings and Eva Smith highlight the deep-seated class divisions in early 20th-century Britain. The characters' attitudes towards Eva are heavily influenced by her lower social status.

Gender Roles: The women in the play face different expectations and opportunities compared to the men, reflecting the gender inequalities of the period. The tragic circumstances of Eva's life are partly a result of her vulnerability as a woman in a patriarchal society.

Guilt and Responsibility: The characters' different reactions to their roles in Eva's death reflect their feelings of guilt and their willingness (or unwillingness) to take responsibility for their actions. Sheila and Eric feel guilty and accept responsibility, while their parents, Arthur and Sybil, deflect blame.

Judgment and Consequence: The arrival of Inspector Goole forces the characters to face judgment for their actions. The prospect of public scandal reflects the societal judgment they fear, while the repeated phone call at the end of the play suggests that actions have consequences.

Age and Youth: There's a clear divide between the younger and older characters in the play. The younger characters (Sheila and Eric) are willing to change and accept responsibility, while the older characters (Mr. and Mrs. Birling) are set in their ways and refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoings. This represents the clash between the old and new generations.

Hypocrisy: The Birlings are initially portrayed as a respectable upper-class family, but as the play progresses, their actions reveal them to be hypocritical. They preach high moral standards but fail to live up to them, illuminating the hypocrisy prevalent in the upper classes of society.

SETTINGS

The setting of the play is the time and location of the story. *An Inspector Calls* is set in 1912 in Edwardian England. The family are successful middle-class people and at the start of the play,

Mr. Birling in particular is very complacent. The play was actually written after the Second World War.

LITERARY DEVICES/FIGURES OF SPEECH

Effect of lighting: Priestley uses a change in lighting to show the change in atmosphere after inspector's arrival.

Symbolism of the doorbell: The sharp ring of the doorbell interrupts Birling's speech about social responsibility. This forces audience to make a connection between Inspector's arrival and Birling's speech.

DRAMATIC IRONY

The audience knows that Mr. Birling's speech is full of inaccuracies about the Titanic and war. There is dramatic irony in the way Mrs. Birling is trapped at the end of the scene. This also highlights her hypocrisy to the audience: we know that she would not apply the same standards to her own family.

Use of emulation: when Inspector leaves, Eric emulates the Inspector using harsh and commanding language

Hubris: Excessive pride that ultimately leads to character's downfall.

Euphemism: A word or phrase used in place of one that might be considered offensive or indelicate in good company.

Juxtaposition: Placing two images or ideas side-side to highlight the difference between them.

HOME WORK

1. Summarise the plot summary of "An Inspector Calls.
2. Highlight the roles played by any THREE characters in "An Inspector Calls.
3. Write on THREE themes in "An Inspector Calls.